

“A Dwelling-House and Other Conveniences...”

A History of Maryland’s Government House

Foundation for the Preservation of Government House of Maryland Inc.

Maryland State Archives

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Introduction by Governor Larry Hogan and First Lady Yumi Hogan

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Back of the cover text:

From the earliest days of the province, Maryland struggled to supply a suitable home for its governors. In 1744, the colonial legislature purchased four acres of land for “...*building thereon a Dwelling-House, and other Conveniences, for the Residence of the Governor of Maryland.*” This failed effort would become infamous as “Bladen’s Folly.” After the Revolutionary War, the state’s governors lived in Jennings House which had been confiscated from the last royal governor, Robert Eden. It was not until a century later, after the Civil War, that the state finally built its long planned for ‘governor’s mansion’ in the shadow of the historic State House.

This book, drawing upon decades of research and many archival sources, tells the story of that ill-fated first house, the importance of Jennings House, and the Victorian mansion that was finally constructed in 1868 and completely remodeled in 1935 as the Georgian country house we see today. In honor of the 150th anniversary of its construction, the Foundation for the Preservation of Government House, Inc., with the Maryland State Archives, has created the first comprehensive history of the home of Maryland’s governors and their families which has been at the center of Annapolis political and cultural life for the past century and a half.

Select excerpted draft text and images:

From Chapter One:

Finding a Home for Maryland’s Governors: *Bladen’s Folly and Jennings House*

Finally, in 1744, a breakthrough seemed to have been made when the legislature awarded Governor Thomas Bladen £4,000 to build a house for his use. In response to a message from the governor, the Lower House stipulated that: “...purchasing the said four Acres of Land, inclosing [sic] the same, as also the Building thereon a Dwelling-House, and other Conveniences, for the Residence of the Governor of Maryland for the time being, shall not exceed the Sum of four Thousand Pounds Current Money...”

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...First, Stephen Bordley claimed ownership of the land and the Lower House, of which Bordley was a prominent member, forced Bladen to compensate him £1,200. Further battles with the Lower House over money and the elaborate design of the house continued and, finally, in July 1747, the House refused to approve any more funds, not even a roof to protect the work that had already been completed. A committee of the General Assembly visited the site and found many faults with it, including the materials, and workmanship. By refusing more funds to complete the building, they, in effect, condemned it to become a “Gothic ruin.”

Thus, the house remained partially built and unprotected for twenty years and was allowed to fall into ruin. In May 1766, Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to a friend, offered this description of Annapolis: “They have no publick buildings worth mentioning except a governor’s house, the hull of which after being nearly finished, they have suffered to go to ruin.” Such was the fate of what became known as “Bladen’s Folly.” After the Revolutionary War, it was turned over to St. John’s College which completed it and renamed it McDowell Hall, after the first president of the college. The architect of the roof and cupola of the completed building was Joseph Clark who also designed the dome of the Maryland State House.



McDowell Hall, on the campus of St. John’s College, infamous as “Bladen’s Folly”

From Chapter Two:

The Victorian Mansion

[from description of the laying of the cornerstone, September 14, 1868]

While the Naval Academy band played, a choir of ladies serenaded the Grand Master of the local

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Masonic lodge who presided over the ceremony, which included the placement of a tin box within the cornerstone itself. Inside was "an autograph letter of Cecilius Calvert, second Baron of Baltimore...the impression of the Great Seal of Maryland, a complete list of state officers and judges of the Court of Appeals, and various coins..." Governor Thomas Swann, who only a few weeks later would be elected to Congress and never live in the much anticipated new mansion, then introduced former Congressman John Thomson Mason, Jr. (grand nephew of George Mason) who gave a brief address. The benediction was given by Reverend Samuel Leech, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church--who in his previous post in 1858 lived but a mile from Harper's Ferry, and in 1909 published one of the only eyewitness accounts of the John Brown's raid. At the conclusion of the ceremony, children from the Female Public School chanted the Lord's Prayer.

With the laying of the cornerstone, Maryland embarked on building the first permanent home for its governors, having sold the grand colonial home that was 'borrowed' and then acquired to be the governors' home to the Naval Academy and with the ill-fated "Bladen's Folly," just down the street, by then established as McDowell Hall.

The process of building this new residence began in early January 1868 when the selection and purchase of a site was referred to the Committees on Public Buildings of the Senate and House of Delegates. The General Assembly authorized \$100,000 to be spent in acquiring the land and "erecting thereon a Mansion for the Governor of this State." After considering a number of parcels put forth by various Annapolis landowners, the committees, acting together, reported to the Legislature that they had selected three lots owned by Mrs. Matilda E. Green, Mr. and Mrs. James W. Allen, and George E. Franklin, for a total sum of \$31,035.75. Together, these lots made up almost a two-acre parcel, ideally located immediately across from the State House.



Early image of Government House as completed in 1870

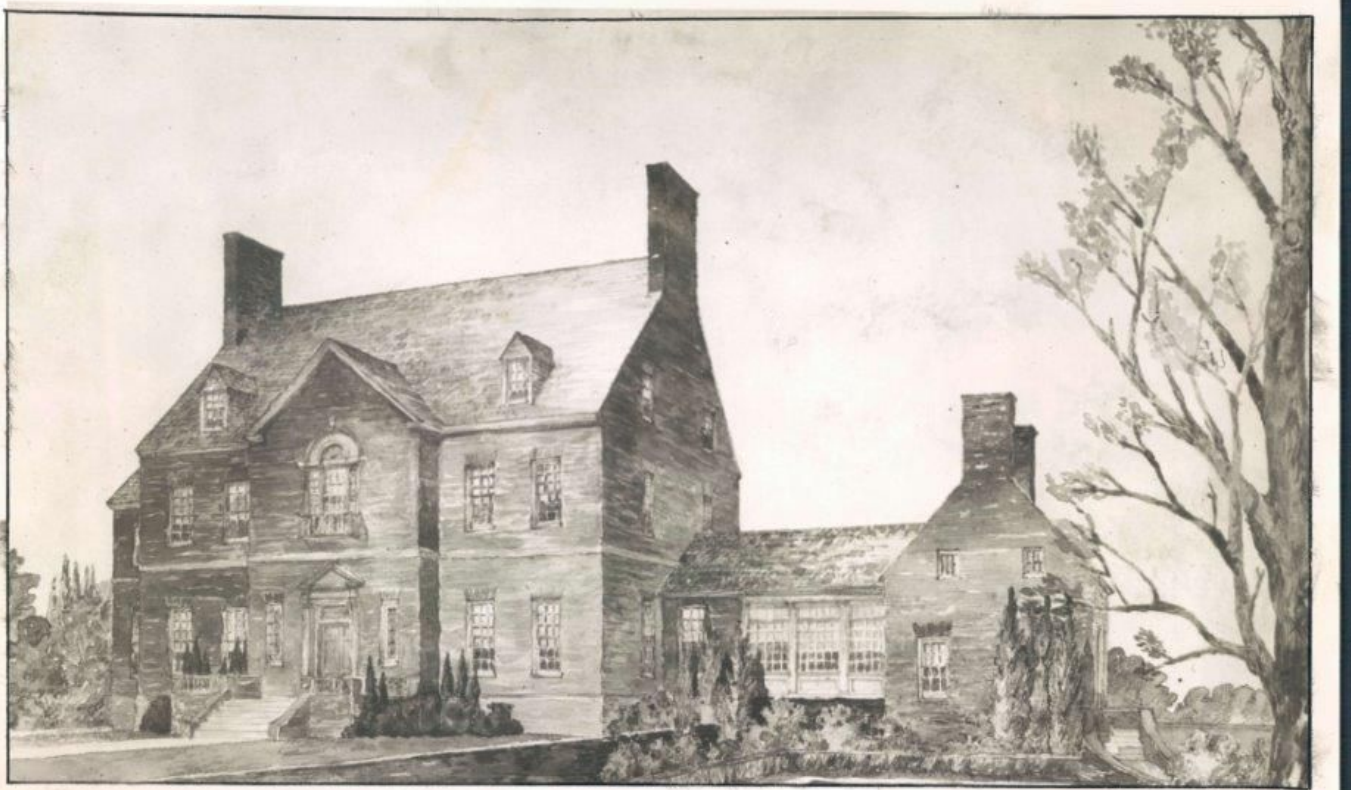


View of the Governor's Mansion and State House, circa 1886

From Chapter Four:

From Victorian Mansion to Colonial Revival "Country House"

Governor Nice concluded his report with this: "Thousands of visitors come to Annapolis annually, men of prominence and high rank, notables and officials of foreign countries, and in most instances, while visiting the Naval Academy, pay courtesy calls upon the Governor of the State at his official residence. The impression gathered from their inspection of the Governor's official residence, is one of the impressions they may carry away of the State of Maryland, and I would have that impression be one of credit to our people. I would have the State of Maryland stand out boldly as the possessor of the finest type of Architecture, gracefully furnished, and one of the most beautiful Government Houses in the United States, and it is for these reasons that I have done that which has called forth controversy but which, I am convinced, in the future will be remarked by contentment, if not congratulation." The bottom line was that he still needed \$29,618.94 to finish the job.



*Early rendering by Clyde Friz, architect, of the 'remodeled' Government House,
as originally planned with only one wing*

[Sidebar image and text]

"Harry and Frank": A Presidential Visit to Government House

A highlight of the Nice administration was certainly the visit of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Government House on September 5, 1938. At the request of Annapolis Mayor Louis N. Phipps, the president stopped in Annapolis for a brief visit on his way home from a political trip to the Eastern Shore. The president spent the day touring the Eastern Shore, including Salisbury and Denton, where he had gone to support the candidacy of Congressman David J. Lewis for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Millard E. Tydings. While in Maryland, Roosevelt criticized Tydings sharply as a "betrayers" of the administration for his opposition to some of the president's New Deal legislation.

Roosevelt began his visit to Annapolis with a stop at the War Memorial on St. John's College campus where he made a short speech to the crowd of 1,000 who had gathered to see him. The president drew an analogy between the colonial buildings in Annapolis and the government, saying that the buildings were only useful because they had been modernized and that "We have the same form of government we have always had, but it needs to be constantly modernized."

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In order to accommodate the president, who was in a wheelchair, a special ramp was built. The ramp was made permanent during the administration of William Donald Schaefer, 1987-1995, when an elevator for the handicapped was also installed in the house. After Roosevelt and his party were greeted by Governor and Mrs. Nice, the president and Nice retired to a private meeting which was reported to have been very friendly, with the two men calling each other "Harry" and "Frank." Roosevelt was accompanied on his visit to Annapolis by his friends Postmaster General James A. Farley and Curley Byrd, president of the University of Maryland.

The prestige of this visit by a popular sitting president did not translate into campaign success for Governor Nice. Two months later, Herbert O'Connor defeated Nice in his run for election to a second term and took office on January 11, 1939. It was generally accepted that the long, drawn out controversy over the cost of the renovation of Government House contributed, at least in part, to his defeat.

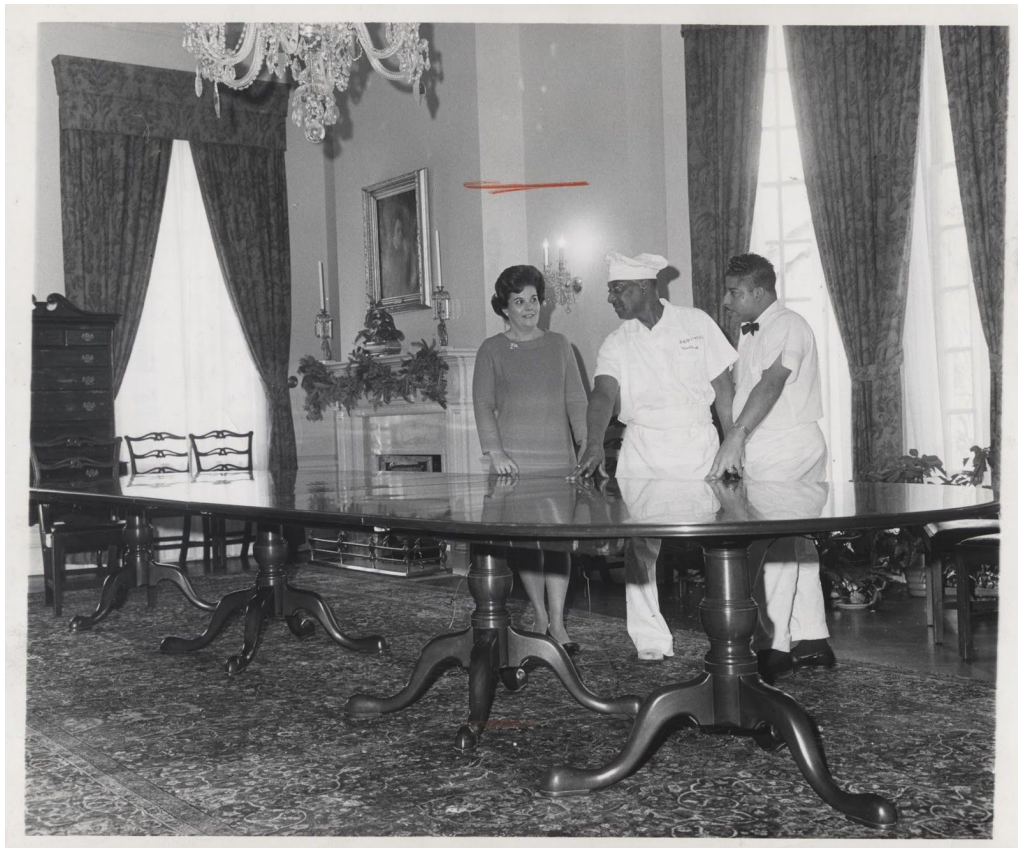


President Franklin Roosevelt leaves Government House, September 1938

From Chapter Five:

Government House becomes a Modern Home

Redecorating and remodeling were also included in the budget and a sauna bath and ping pong table, paid for by the Agnews, rounded out the new features for the first family. A major improvement for the family and the staff was a new banquet table in the public dining room. The Potthast table that had been acquired during the Goldsborough administration in 1912 was, quite literally, on its last legs. Its leaves were being supported by wooden sawhorses that had been stained brown and the process of changing the length of the table for different events was complicated and time consuming. The new table was created especially for Government House by a furniture company in Buffalo, New York, using specifications applied to a standard design offered by the company at a cost of \$2,800. This table is still in use in the state dining room and the original Potthast table was restored and is in the private dining room of the mansion.



First Lady Judy Agnew inspects the new dining table in January 1968 with Government House cooks James A. (Pete) Diggs and Booker T. Williams

Images showing change over time in the gardens of Government House



First Lady Edna Nice in the newly established side garden with small pool and fountain, 1936



The same garden as it appeared in the 1970s and 1980s

Images of interior change over time



First Lady Edna Nice in the newly added Conservatory, 1936



The Conservatory designed as an homage to Maryland interior designer Billy Baldwin during the administration of Governor Harry Hughes



The portraits of Maryland's first ladies as displayed during the 1970s



First Lady Yumi Hogan with the portraits of Maryland's first ladies as installed in the Victorian Parlor in 2016